DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 604 CS 215 618

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TITLE Teaching to the Camera: Learning Long Distance.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; *Cooperative Programs; *Distance Education; Faculty Development; *Gifted; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; Research Papers (Students); Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Georgia State University; Joint Venture; *Learning Environment

ABSTRACT

A study examined a joint service project undertaken by two Georgia State University (GSU) English department faculty members interested in studying distance learning technology. GSU's system uses fiber optics and technology to connect learners at a remote site to a teacher. The project involved assisting in preparing gifted students in grades 6-8 to write a research paper for the annual social science fair. The three sessions included: making topic choices; explaining paraphrasing, quoting, and plagiarism, bibliography and works-cited entries; and presenting document forms and exercises for the students to complete. Results of student surveys indicated that over half the students believed that the level of attentiveness and participation was the same as in regular class, but 8 out of 15 indicated that they had to listen more carefully than normal. The survey also included five differently worded questions about student enjoyment or interest. Also, 66% of the students responded that they found the distance learning environment more interesting than other classes; 13 out of 15 indicated that they enjoyed the class and would like to take another and that instruction was very clear; and all said that it helped them with their social science research project. Instructors found that questions involving personnel and finances for these projects arose, as did pedagogy issues raised by this type of teaching. Distance learning enrichment activities can supplement regular classroom instruction and may help vanquish students' fears about college professors and their teaching practices. (Student survey form is appended.) (CR)

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ED 402 604

Teaching to the Camera: Learning Long Distance

Phyllis Surrency Dallas and Marie L. Franklin

BACKGROUND

In January and February 1995, my colleague Marie Franklin and I decided to experiment; we undertook a joint service project, one that involved distance learning technology. The English department had been asked by a middle school teacher in another county for assistance in preparing gifted students in grades six through eight to write a research paper for the annual social science fair. We volunteered to work on this enrichment activity as a team because our motivation was the same. Having never seen a distance learning class, we were interested in learning about this new technology. We also wanted to explore the outreach applications because our school, Georgia Southern University (GSU), had recently become a regional university. Moreover, we knew that the State of Georgia had committed financial, professional, and academic resources to distance learning, and the University was increasing the number of core curriculum classes taught via distance learning. And, since we teach core classes, learning about the technology and its applications would enhance our professional development and teaching techniques.

CS215618

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To start, because there are different types of systems that use the rubric "distance learning," let us explain how our system works. Fiber optics and technology connect learners at a remote site to a teacher. The actual image transference occurs through the compression of video information, in this case images and voices, into digital impulses sent through fiber optic telephone lines. The images are decompressed at the remote site and broadcast onto TV monitors. Because this technological change cannot occur instantaneously, there is about a two-second time lapse between presentation and reception. Since the remote site has cameras and other equipment, the process is interactive. While we were teaching, we could see and hear the students' responses. In order to facilitate instruction, the classroom we broadcast from was equipped with three cameras--one camera to focus on the lecturer; one, on an on-site audience, if present; and one, on the Elmo, a type of overhead. The room also had television monitors, a phone, a fax, and microphones to help in transferring instruction to the students in a similarly equipped classroom at the distant site. (With the Georgia system seven remote sites are possible; however, only one site is visible at a time.) For our project, we did not have any students at the originating site, only remote participants, and we transmitted to one site. Because of the students' youth, their teacher was present during the sessions to monitor their behavior.

A brief history of Georgia Southern's involvement with distance learning indicates how quickly the commitment to the

technology has spread. In 1991, the University entered into a trial distance learning experiment with a regional technical school via this compressed video technology. When the technical school instructor quit during the middle of the quarter, a GSU professor stepped in and finished the class. This new technology was so impressive that GSU purchased two sets of the necessary equipment, and by Winter Quarter, 1992, two graduate classes were being taught from GSU to Brunswick Junior College, about two hours away. Then, in 1993 as a result of Southern Bell rate overcharges, approximately $50 million dollars was appropriated for Senate Bill 144, which established the Distance Learning/Telemedicine fund. Institutions were invited to submit concept papers for funding consideration. Fortunately, GSU's proposal was accepted, and the school joined GSAMS, the Georgia Statewide Academic and Medical Systems Network. Currently, GSU can simultaneously connect with seven of the two hundred GSAMS sites in Georgia. Although used initially for graduate courses, GSU's distance learning system is currently becoming more involved in teaching postsecondary options or joint enrollment courses for high school seniors. So far GSU has offered the introduction to government and to communication, college algebra, American history, and the first-year composition sequence via the system.

PROJECT

To make our project truly a distance experience, we initially tried discussing all the project's plans with the

classroom teacher over the phone. However, it quickly became clear that the phone conversations were inadequate to work out all details, so we met with her at the middle school to discuss expectations and to generate some discussion about what we all felt could be accomplished. This personal interaction was very important because we were able to cover a lot of ground in a short period of time. At that initial meeting, we found the project took shape. Once we learned what material the classroom teacher wanted us to cover, we planned three fifty-minute sessions: two formal presentations one week apart and a final question/answer session two weeks later. After that face-to-face meeting, we were able to communicate successfully with her by phone or fax or during the sessions themselves.

In the first meeting with the students, we discussed limiting the topics for the research papers and organizing and outlining material from researched sources. In order to ensure that we could give pertinent, concrete examples to the middle schoolers, we had chosen a topic and researched it ourselves to detail for them the steps involved in organizing and outlining a research paper. During the first session, to get student involvement, we questioned the students about how they were thinking of narrowing their topic choices and attempted to establish some sort of "distance rapport." Also, we had faxed a skeleton outline and a completed one to the teacher, who distributed them to the students on our cue. Aside from some

audio difficulty because the teacher's remote microphone was not on, the session went well.

We also videotaped this meeting to review our interaction with the students and with each other and to critique our distance learning pedagogical styles. This videotaping proved crucial in helping us prepare for the next meetings. After watching our debut video, we realized that we had to spend time on choreographing our next meetings to avoid on-air glitches. At one point in the first session, I was seated at a table and Marie was writing on the board. The video showed her bottom moving back and forth behind my head. We also realized that we needed to stop shifting our gaze from the monitors, where we could see how we looked, to the camera, which broadcast our image to the students. If we wanted to appear to talk to them, then we had to "look" at them by keeping our focus on the camera.

For the second session, the teacher had asked that we explain paraphrasing and quoting as well as plagiarism. In order for there to be some continuity between the sessions, we faxed two articles for the students to have read before the class. These articles had been included in the previous session's information. Also, we had created exercises for the students to complete on paraphrasing and quoting and on how to avoid plagiarism. This session also seemed productive; however, because the students were a little late in arriving, it was cut short.

While the third session was originally to be devoted exclusively to questions and answers to clarify any misunderstandings the students might have developed, the teacher asked that we explain bibliography and works cited entries because the students did not understand their significance. Therefore, we used the same articles and information from the two previous meetings to create examples of documentation forms as well as exercises for the students to complete. Although we left time for the question-and-answer period, the students had very few questions. To fill the rest of the time, the teacher walked around the room to let each student tell us what he or she learned from the presentations. Because some of the students were camera shy, they got giggly when they saw themselves and their peers on television. The last part of the session then disintegrated.

ASSESSMENT

In terms of our immediate goals--learning about distance learning, working as colleagues (this was a first collaborative effort for both of us), and being engaged in an outreach project--we were pleased with the results. Immediately we got an inkling of the complexities of distance learning by talking with GSU's distance learning coordinator and by visiting college classes being taught to remote sites. Because we worked as a team in planning the project and learning about some of the pedagogical problems associated with the technology, we could brainstorm ideas and divide responsibilities. This division was

good because the preparation time for a distance learning situation and the need for organization, we had been told, are greater than for a normal class. We quickly realized just how much more organized and prepared we had to be. We spent hours talking with the classroom teacher and faxing her material days before the sessions; after all, two offices were involved in preparing material. To teach aspects of the research process--matter that normally we could have taught with little to no extra prepping--we spent thirty to forty hours preparing for three fifty-minute sessions. The greater preparation time, of course, was partially related to the fact that we were working with an unusual audience for us, middle schoolers. This audience was in many ways intimidating, not only because we were not used to working with the age group, but also because their teacher indicated that we were for some of them their first contact with "college teachers" and that we might spark their thinking about going to college.

Because we wanted this enrichment activity to be a positive learning experience, not just a TV interlude, we felt we needed interaction. Too, we are aware, as Paulo Freire has theorized in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), many students have come to believe that their appropriate role in the learning environment is a passive one since they are the recipients, not the seekers of knowledge. They are in the classroom to have their heads magically, effortlessly filled with knowledge. Of course, many educators believe that television has exacerbated the problems

associated with passivity. We were also concerned about interaction because the material we were to cover--organization, paraphrasing, quoting, plagiarism, and bibliographic entries--is not the most stimulating of matter even in normal classroom situations. We worked consciously, then, on ways to spark student interaction and use material appropriate for them--generating sample materials dealing with a social science topic, developing exercises which we could use to ask them questions, using their names in exercises, leaving time for student questions, having at each session a list of the students and their projects to which we could refer. In other words, because we were transcending normal classroom boundaries, we worked hard to make the presentations effective and stimulating.

In order to assess the students' sense about how effective the interaction was, we had questions about listening, participating, and asking questions in the student survey that was part of our evaluation of the sessions (See Appendix, questions #3, 4, 5, and 8). Generally, over half of the students responded that the level of attentiveness and participation was the same for these distance learning sessions as for a regular class, but eight out of the fifteen students indicated that they had to listen more carefully than normally. This need to pay close attention is to be expected in any distance learning situation considering the tremendous aural demands. These demands are enhanced, we learned, because we could not use a blackboard effectively with the cameras and the overhead (ELMO)

accommodates little written material (depending on handwriting, five or six words); we had, therefore, to rely heavily on prepared handouts to supplement the lecture material. The classroom teacher in her evaluation also commented on the quality of the students' inattentiveness, noting that "the lack of physical presence tends to let adolescents sometimes wander into space." During the last session, perhaps because of sensitivity to the medium, the students were hesitant to ask questions when called upon and often repeated something a peer had said. Thus, although many of the students indicated that there was no problem with attentiveness and participation, we conclude that any distance learning instruction will demand that the instructor be particularly diligent about including participation activities in the class, be conscious of involving all students in activities, and be extra-alert to inattentiveness.

Our student assessment also had five differently worded questions about how the students enjoyed the experience or how interesting they found it (See Appendix, questions #6, 10, 11, 12, 13). Generally the students were positive in their responses. To the statement "I found [this distance-learning environment] more interesting than other classes," 66% of the students responded they strongly agreed or agreed. Thirteen out of fifteen indicated that they enjoyed the class and would like other distance-learning enrichment sessions. A few students were, however, very clearly disappointed. One girl said that we were "not funny, [but] too serious," while one of the boys

bluntly stated, "I didn't like anything. They were boring." One student did, however, validate our egos by proclaiming that we "were great."

As novices to distance technology, we were most concerned about the level of learning. According to a study by John Miller, Michael C. McKenna, and Pamela Ramsey of Georgia Southern (1993), there is no statistically significant difference in the learning rates of adult learners in on-site and remote-site classes. A distance-learning workshop I attended conducted by the National Guard Professional Education Center (1995) claimed that education through interactive television has been highly successful. The National Guard's adult students learn material from this kind of educational scenario more easily than from residential programs and retain it longer. The PEC specialists claim that students have improved learning and retention rates because upon completion of units or sessions, the students go to their assigned jobs and immediately put newly learned matter to practical use. So far we have learned of no research that has studied the learning and retention rates of adolescents involved with the kind of enrichment activity we offered.

Two of the student assessment questions (See Appendix, questions #1 & 14) addressed the clarity and usefulness of the instruction. Overwhelmingly, the students responded favorably: thirteen out of fifteen stating that the instruction was very clear, and fifteen out of fifteen believing that the instruction had helped them with their social science research project. The

classroom teacher also responded positively, saying that the "materials provided . . . were excellent resource materials" and that the students "understood much better the procedures involved in writing" the research paper.

The instructional portion of the sessions did not, however, go entirely as we had hoped and therefore caused us some dissatisfaction. We were unprepared for some of the questions the students asked. During the first session--devoted to narrowing, organizing, and developing the topic--we got few specific questions about these subjects. Instead, the students asked, "Do you need a *2* if there is a *1* in an outline?", "When do you use numbers and when letters?", "Is there also a period after a Roman numeral?", "Will a college teacher fail a student who turns in a paper without an outline?" While expecting questions, we had not anticipated specific ones about the format of a formal outline and felt as though there was a certain amount of overkill in having two university instructors discussing periods after Roman numerals. The inquiries about college practices, however, were clearly a different matter. As part of our outreach service, we were happy to dispel myths about the college English teacher boogieman or boogiewoman. During the other sessions, the students asked more questions involving the horror stories that they had already heard about first-year writing courses. As clearly as we could, we tried to explain the concept of academic freedom and to encourage positive thinking about their future academic experiences and about writing.

While we enjoyed working on this project, it did leave us with questions about distance learning and concerns about the implications of this technology. One concern involves personnel and finances. As taxpayers, we were very aware that this project involving fifteen students entailed the efforts of at least five adults at times--two college instructors, a classroom teacher, and two facilitators to operate the equipment. As distance learning spreads, will public school and university systems continue to devote this kind of personnel and financial support to distance learning instruction?

As the efforts continue to link schools and teaching facilities, what kinds of enrichment activities will college instructors be asked to do as a part of their service? We know of instances where college instructors have been asked to provide enrichment activities for high school students and the classroom teachers have left the room during the sessions. Because of this technology, will we become glorified "baby-sitters" or substitutes for harried public school teachers? Will other college instructors be asked to explain the mechanics of formal outlining?

We are also concerned about the pedagogical issues raised by this type of teaching. Will it foster student passivity? Will it enhance the notion that so many students seem to have that education must always be "fun" and that teachers must always be "on"? Will it, in other words, strengthen the image of us as primarily entertainers rather than educators?

While we believe these are legitimate concerns, we do not think that they should discourage instructors from exploring distance learning technology and applications. Our experience leads us to believe that distance learning enrichment activities can supplement regular classroom instruction and may help to vanquish fears about college professors and their teaching practices. Our experience gave us a valuable opportunity to collaborate with a public school teacher. And as professional educators, we know that we must be engaged in the life-long process of learning and growing. As technology changes, expands, and redefines the "classroom" and possibly reshapes our roles as educators, we must face the accompanying challenges and possibilities.

APPENDIX

STUDENT SURVEY

This class has been presented in a format referred to as distance learning. Your opinion of this type of class is important to us. Please complete the following questions. For the first questions, please circle **1 if you STRONGLY AGREE, 2 if you AGREE, 3 if you NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE, 4 if you DISAGREE, and 5 if you STRONGLY DISAGREE.**

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	The course material was presented as clearly in this class as in other classes that I have taken.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Because this class was in a distance-learning environment, I found it more interesting than other classes.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I found it difficult to pay attention because the distance-learning instructors were not physically present.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Because these were distance-learning sessions, I was more reluctant to ask questions and make comments.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Because of the distance learning, I participated less in class discussions.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I enjoyed watching the instructors on the television monitor.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	The professors' body language (gestures, movements, etc.) was more noticeable in the distance-learning class.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I had to listen more carefully in the distance-learning sessions than in a regular class.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	There were fewer distractions in the distance-learning sessions than in my regular classes.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I would have liked an actual classroom visit from the professors rather than the distance learning.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I enjoyed this distance-learning class.	1	2	3	4	5

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12.	I would like other sessions by distance learning.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I am glad that I had this distance-learning experience.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	This distance-learning experience helped me with my social science project.	1	2	3	4	5

PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.

15. Is this the first distance-learning class you have taken? _____ YES _____ NO

16. What grade are you in? _____

17. What is your gender? _____ Male _____ Female

18. What did you like about the course/instructors?

19. What did you dislike about the course/instructors?

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